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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Repentant Soul or Walking Corpse? Debatable Apparitions in Medieval England[1]

Jacqueline Simpson

Abstract

This paper examines two sets of medieval English narratives describing encounters with ghosts, those by William of Newburgh and those in a manuscript from Byland Abbey. Both combine theological elements with non-religious features, some of which can be linked to pre-Christian practices and others to later folklore. But neither the theology nor the folklore is uniform. Furthermore, it is not possible to assign theological attitudes solely to the clergy and/or an educated élite, and "folkloric" ideas solely to an underclass. These texts display an ongoing medieval debate in which neither clerics nor the laity spoke with a single voice.

Scholars interested in the cultural evolution of ideas about ghosts have pointed out that certain stories from medieval Yorkshire do not fit comfortably into the standard patterns of the period (Finucane 1982, 60; Schmitt 1998, 82–3 and 142–7). They are found in the writings of two authors attached to monasteries only a few miles apart, in Ryedale, but separated by some two hundred years. The first group forms chapters 22–4 in Book V of the *Historia Rerum Anglicarum* written c.1198 by William, a canon in the Augustinian priory of Newburgh (Stevenson 1856 [1996], 656–61); the second group was added anonymously to a manuscript belonging to the Cistercian abbey at Byland by someone, presumably a monk, whose handwriting dates him to c.1400 (James 1922). [2]

Their strangeness consists in the way they combine incongruous elements: Christian doctrines about sin, death, and the afterlife on the one hand, and on the other some macabre or grotesque beliefs which appear incompatible with theology. In William's accounts, the problem at issue is the nature of physical revenants: are they animated by demons, and should they be laid by bodily or spiritual means? At Byland two hundred years later, the basic assumption is that revenants are repentant sinners undergoing Purgatorial punishments from which they can be released, but there are also motifs about shape-changing which have no religious significance, and point forward to the folklore of later centuries. So do these narratives reveal an opposition between élite clerical theology and the less orthodox beliefs of the laity? Or is there interaction and compromise between the various viewpoints and practices described? The validity of the concept of medieval "popular religion" is currently being debated; [3] we have here some relevant material for analysis.

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The Tradition of Physical Revenants

The most immediately striking feature of both sets of tales is that all William's revenants and many of those at Byland are not ghosts in the usual sense of that word but "walking dead," corpses that have literally emerged from their graves. It has been pointed out more than once (most recently in Schmitt [1998] and Murray [1999]) that their closest documentary parallels in medieval Europe are to be found in Icelandic sagas describing *draugar*, walking corpses which attack humans and livestock, and have to be wrestled with, decapitated, and burnt; it is then argued that since William of Newburgh and the Byland monk were both Yorkshiremen, their beliefs on this point might not be native English ones, but imported traditions, surviving among the descendants of Scandinavian settlers in what was once the Danelaw.

However, archaeology tells a different tale. A good many Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon burials have been found where corpses were decapitated (the head often being placed between the feet), or laid face down, crushed under boulders, bound, or dismembered; recent discoveries at Sutton Hoo show that some bodies, possibly those of executed criminals, were still being subjected to this treatment as late as the eleventh century, that is, in a fully Christian society (Merrifield 1987, 71–6; Wilson 1992, 77–86; Carver 1998, 137–44; Reynolds 1998). Two interpretations are possible: that it was a symbolic way of dishonouring the corpse, or that it was a ritual to prevent the dead from "walking." Several folklorists in later times reported a belief that those who are likely to "walk" should be buried face down, so that they will only dig their way deeper into the ground if they try to move (Baring-Gould 1913, 140–1; Tongue 1958, 44). In 1916, English soldiers who were seen burying a German face down gave the same explanation (*Folk-Lore* 27, 224–5). These interpretations are not, of course, mutually exclusive; in some circumstances both intentions might be appropriate. Such burials show that a belief in physical revenants and traditional ways of counteracting them was indigenous to Britain long before the Viking settlement, and persisted several centuries after the Conversion.

The lateness of the Sutton Hoo evidence in particular makes it less surprising to find references to reanimated corpses in several twelfth-century writers. Thus, William of Malmesbury says it is well known that the Devil causes the bodies of the evil dead to walk (*Gesta Regum* II, chap. 4). Walter Map (c.1190) tells how in Hereford a corpse emerged from its grave and wandered the streets by night, calling out the names of people who then sickened and died; it was laid by a sword blow to the head as it sank into its grave, after decapitation and holy water had failed (Map 1914, 99–100, *De Nugis Curialium* II, chap. 22). The richest source is William of Newburgh, who recorded (c.1198) four contemporary accounts of physically active and malevolent corpses in various parts of Britain, given him by trustworthy informants, and indicated that he had heard of others too (Stevenson 1856 [1996], 656–61).

William of Newburgh

The first of William's accounts is set in Buckinghamshire, where a dead man returned to his widow's bed, almost crushing her with his weight, and then

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terrorised kinsmen and neighbours. The troubles ceased when Bishop Hugh of Lincoln sent a written pardon to be laid on the breast of the corpse. In the second, at Berwick-on-Tweed, the "pestiferous corpse" of a wealthy but wicked man roamed the city, pursued by a pack of barking dogs; it was cut to pieces and burnt, but even so the town suffered more than other places from a plague which was prevalent at the time. Thirdly, at Melrose, a friar who was keeping guard in a cemetery from which an undead corpse was expected to emerge was attacked by this corpse, but struck it with an axe and chased it back to its grave; next day it was dug up to be burnt, and observers noted its "huge wound, and a great quantity of gore which had flowed from it in the sepulchre."

William's final example occurred in 1196 at "Anantis Castle" (unidentified; Stevenson suggests Alnwick in Northumberland). A wicked man, who had died angry and unshriven, came out of his grave every night and roamed the streets, corrupting the air with his breath, so that plague broke out and many died. Most townsfolk fled, and a priest summoned a meeting of "wise and religious men" to advise him on what to do, and to comfort the distressed inhabitants; while this was going on, two bold young men decided to dig up the body and burn it; it was found to be enormously swollen and blood gushed forth after a sharp blow from a spade; they tore the heart out, burned the body, and thus put an end to the plague.

William's informants were people directly involved: the Archdeacon in Buckinghamshire, the highly respected old priest at "Anantis," the monks who dug up the corpse at Melrose. Finding nothing comparable in older historians, he concluded that such revenants were a feature peculiar to his own times, and commented that he could have cited many more instances if he had wanted to. It appears that anecdotes testifying to belief in the walking dead were circulating actively in the 1190s, perhaps as part of a "flap" of the type familiar to students of today's Contemporary Legends.

Debating the Undead

William's accounts are also rich in social context, enabling us to observe debates in which interpretations of perceived supernatural events are negotiated. A clash between clerical and secular views is explicit in the case of the Buckinghamshire revenant. At first the townsfolk tried to drive it away by posting guards on their homes at night, but this proved useless, so at length, "alarmed beyond measure, [they] thought it advisable to seek counsel of the church" and took their troubles to Stephen, Archdeacon of the diocese, at a meeting of diocesan clergy. Stephen felt himself unqualified to take action on such an unusual case, but requested advice from Bishop Hugh of Lincoln, who "held a searching investigation with his companions." Some of these "said that such things had often befallen in England, and cited frequent examples to show that tranquillity could not be restored to the people until the body of this most wretched man were dug up and burnt." This is ambiguous—does it mean that these companions of the bishop, who presumably were clerics, shared the belief of the laity in the efficacy of burning? Or were they just warning him that in such cases local people never felt safe unless this was done? Either way, Bishop Hugh was shocked; he thought such a measure would be "indecent and improper in the last degree,"

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and instead wrote a letter of absolution in his own hand, which he sent to Archdeacon Stephen with instructions to have the tomb opened and the body inspected, and the letter laid on its breast.

In the Berwick case, there is no mention that any clergy were consulted, but William's report does incidentally show how social and educational differences affected reactions to the spectre's activities. In view of the widespread panic, he writes, "the higher and middle classes of the people held a necessary investigation into what was requisite to be done," though disagreeing on what exactly the danger was. "The more simple among them" feared the ghost would beat them up, but "the wiser shrewdly concluded" that the threat was a medical one: the air would become infected with plague by "the constant whirling through it of the pestiferous corpse," as had often happened in similar cases. Some people claimed the ghost itself had told them there would be no peace as long as it remained unburnt. So the committee of investigators got hold of "ten young men renowned for boldness" and ordered them to dig up the corpse, dismember it, and burn it.

At Melrose, conversely, the drama was played out entirely within a monastic community, yet a physical solution was adopted, apparently without hesitation or debate. Only one person was being haunted, "a certain illustrious lady" whose late chaplain, a worldly minded monk with an unseemly fondness for hunting, had taken to hovering "with loud groans and horrible murmurs" around her bedchamber, although his body lay in the cemetery of Melrose Abbey. This lady begged one of the friars there to get his community to pray for her; feeling that she deserved their best efforts, because of her frequent donations to the Abbey, he did more than just pray—he and another friar, together with "two powerful young men," spent the night keeping watch at the chaplain's grave, a vigil which ended in a fight and the wounding of the dead man, whose body was exhumed and burnt next day. Since a real-life friar would probably not play a lone hand in the manner of Brother Cadfael, we can deduce that this drastic action was approved by the Abbey authorities.

Finally, at "Anantis" divergent attitudes are once again apparent. While the parish priest is dining with the "wise and religious" clerics whom he is consulting, and before any decision has been reached, two men whose father had died of the ghost-induced plague take action themselves by digging up the suspect corpse and burning it. It seems they expect some people might object, since they say to one another: "There is no one to hinder us; for in the priest's house a feast is in progress, and the whole town is as silent as if deserted." But once the corpse has been dug out and set alight, they abandon their secrecy; the clergy are told what is going on and come running to see it, so as to be able to "testify to the circumstances." It is one of these clerics who later tells William about the affair.

The Devil's Work?

William naturally imposes a religious interpretation on these events. Although at one point he says he does not know by what agency the dead can issue from their graves, elsewhere he ascribes it to "the contrivance of Satan" and "the handiwork of Satan," and speaks of the Devil rousing up the corpse, "his own

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chosen vessel." This demonic explanation was also that adopted by William of Malmesbury (as mentioned earlier); it is found again in Continental texts in the thirteenth century, though only as a minority view (Caciola 1996, 10–15 and 18–19).

Walter Map too was aware of the demonic interpretation, but seems doubtful about it. One of his anecdotes tells how Sir William Landon consulted Bishop Gilbert Foliot of Hereford about a malevolent revenant. "The Bishop, marvelling, said, 'Perhaps the Lord has given power to the evil angel of that lost soul to move about in the dead corpse' "; he then recommended opening the grave, cutting the corpse's neck through with a spade, and sprinkling it with holy water. Decapitation, as we have seen, was a long-standing procedure in the secular world, while holy water was credited with the power to expel evil spirits. However, this bishop's combination of physical and spiritual tactics did not work; eventually Sir William Landon himself caught the creature on the prowl, chased it back to its grave, and split its head. Map's final comment is, "We know the true facts of this affair, but we do not know its cause" (Map 1914, 99–100).

Since William of Newburgh interprets haunting as Satan's work (rather than Purgatorial penance), it is natural that only one of his revenants is laid by an absolution, it being taken for granted that the other three are beyond any possibility of salvation. They are mutilated and burnt, and it is repeatedly stated that this has been the preferred procedure in many other cases. Despite the distaste of Bishop Hugh of Lincoln and the cautious secrecy of the young men at Anantis, it would seem that, in William's experience, many clerics and laymen were broadly in agreement on the nature of the walking dead, and the best ways of tackling them.

An English "Vampire" Tradition

So far, I have avoided the word "vampire." However, much of what William says about revenants matches accounts of vampires in East European folklore—which are corpses bloated by gases and a blood-like fluid, frequently associated with outbreaks of plague, not the elegant erotic figures of literary and cinematic tradition (Barber 1988). At Anantis, those who dig into the grave find the corpse closer to the surface than they expected; it is "swollen to an enormous corpulence, with its countenance beyond measure turgid and suffused with blood, while the napkin in which it had been wrapped appeared nearly torn to pieces" (the undead were often thought to chew their shrouds). They strike it with a spade, releasing "such a stream of blood that it might be taken for a leech [*sanguisuga*] [4] filled with the blood of many persons," and then cut into it again with a blunt spade to get at the heart, which they rip out and tear to bits, after which the corpse is burnt. At Melrose too, the grave is found to contain "a great quantity of gore," allegedly because the revenant had been wounded the previous night. In the Buckinghamshire case the tomb was opened "in order that it might be demonstrated by inspection in what state the body of that man really was;" it "was found as it had been placed there, and the charter of absolution was placed on its breast." This implies that the state of the corpse is a clue to the spiritual status of the soul; presumably if it had shown signs of having moved,

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or had become swollen or bloody, the man would be regarded as fully damned rather than merely unable to rest on account of his sins, the absolution would be withheld, and the corpse would be burnt.

Every one of these details can be parallelled from East European vampire lore, and some also apply to Icelandic *draugar*. However, this does not mean that these cultures borrowed from one another; the physical facts about delayed putrefaction which underpin the concept of the "undead" are universal, and could produce similar accounts independently in many countries.

There can be no doubt that William of Newburgh and his informants, together with Walter Map and William of Malmesbury, were describing a genuinely ancient folk belief which was apparently quite widespread at that time, and which they were able to harmonise with their religion by claiming that it was Satan who reanimated the corpses. However, practices based on it seem to have fallen into disuse in subsequent generations. True, there remained a folk tradition that the evil dead should be buried face down or pinned with a stake to prevent them walking; but the urge to reopen graves in order to seek and destroy any undecayed and blood-filled corpses is never recorded again, even during times of plague, and does not feature in the corpus of British local legend. This change may well be due to the more spiritual theology of Purgatory which developed from the thirteenth century onwards, as exemplified in the Byland Abbey ghost stories.

The Doctrine of Purgatory

The doctrine of Purgatory, still fairly novel in the 1190s, became fully developed between 1250 and 1300 (Le Goff 1984), and was universal from about 1400 until the Reformation (Thomas 1971, 587–95); it is still standard among Roman Catholics. Purgatory differs essentially from Hell because the souls of sinners in that state (or place) are assured of their salvation; either they have repented of their sins while still living, and these sins are forgiven, or else the sins were too slight to cause damnation. All that is needed is for them to undergo whatever punishment is still, in legalistic terms, "due" for their forgiven sin(s), and to be purified and made ready for Heaven. Although theologians and preachers stressed the pains of Purgatory, often using imagery of fire identical with that of Hell, the eventual happy outcome is never in doubt. The process can be greatly assisted by prayer and Masses offered by the living on behalf of the dead.

The Byland Abbey Ghosts

M. R. James, who first drew attention to the Byland Abbey tales in 1922 by editing the Latin text, picked out as significant their precise localisation and their informal style, which "evidently represent[s] the words of the narrators with some approach to fidelity;" he also said they reminded him of the tales which E. T. Kristensen recorded in late nineteenth-century Denmark—tales which in modern terminology are classified as memorates and local legends.

It is clear that the writer was one of the Byland monks, not only because he had access to the manuscript but because most of the hauntings he describes occurred within a very few miles of the abbey, at places which he names with

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great precision. The alleged happenings were probably close to him in time as well as space. One is dated to the reign of Richard II (1377–95), and the writer was at work around 1400; the rest may well have been equally recent, apart from one which is specifically said to have been "handed down by old men." Certainly the casual way in which people are named suggests that their lives and deaths were still within living memory, and there are passages which hint that those who were in the know would recognise scandalous gossip under the veil of anonymity: "Some say he had known of, or had had a share in, the murder of a certain man, and had done other wicked deeds, which it would be wrong to speak of even now." Indeed, it has recently been suggested (Collins 1999) that there was a malicious motive for recording the stories: to discredit the Augustinian Newburgh Priory two miles away, a long-standing rival to Byland Abbey, by associating it with sin and hauntings. In Story VI, "a certain Canon of Newburgh" is said to have died excommunicated for stealing silver spoons, while in Story II a ghost chooses to be laid on land belonging to the Priory rather than on that of the Abbey. It is an attractive theory, but my concern here is with the beliefs embedded in the tales, not whether they were exploited to further a clerical vendetta.

Religious Aspects of the Byland Tales

Although there are strange features in the Byland tales, which will be discussed later, their basic assumptions about the nature and purpose of ghosts are based on a more optimistic theology than William's. Most of the Byland stories have the following pattern: a living man encounters an alarming ghost; he urges it to say why it has appeared; it replies that it is suffering because of an unforgiven sin, which requires posthumous absolution [5] and/or some requiem Masses; the living man informs a priest, who fulfils the request; the ghost can rest. Such anecdotes are typical of the late medieval eagerness to help "suffering souls" in Purgatory. There is a parallel difference in the behaviour of these ghosts, as compared with William's revenants. However frightening they look at first, they are not demonic, and they do not seriously injure people or spread plague; on the contrary, they long for forgiveness and peace, but being unable to take any initiative themselves must wait for a living man to ask what the trouble is, and offer help; they can then confess, be absolved, and find rest through Masses and prayers offered on their behalf. Correspondingly, whereas William takes destruction of the corpse as the norm and mentions only one posthumous absolution, at Byland the proportions are reversed; one revenant is disinterred and thrown in a lake, but the rest seek and receive forgiveness. The stories would make excellent material for sermons on the need to pray for the dead and prepare for one's own death. One, Story XI, makes a different but related point: that babies who died unbaptised can still be saved by posthumous baptism (it is the international legend ML 4025, "The Child Without a Name").

Christian language and practices appear in incidental details in most of the tales. The living man may address the ghost in the name of the Trinity, or of Jesus, or by virtue of the Blood and the Five Wounds of Jesus, urging it to answer his questions and do him no harm. He may make the sign of the cross. In one story a tailor goes to a rendezvous with a ghost armed with a crucifix,

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four reliquaries, copies of the four gospels, and "the title of triumph"—that is, the words "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews," which were the inscription nailed to the Cross. These objects he arranges round the rim of a protective circle he has drawn on the ground. To us this smacks of ritual magic, as does the word *conjuro*, "I conjure you," repeatedly used for the act of ordering a ghost to explain the reason for its presence; however, there is no hint of disapproval in the texts, and the word *conjuro* is equally linked to the Christian rite of exorcism.

The Coffin in the Lake

The one exception to the pattern of the repentant ghost is Story IV, where a revenant is laid by physical means, without expressing penitence or receiving any spiritual assistance. Interestingly, the narrator sounds shocked by what he is recounting, and disclaims responsibility, since he is only repeating what older men had told him; he himself supplies the prayer which is lacking in the tale:

> Old people tell how a certain James Tankerlay, formerly Rector of Kirkby, was buried in the Chapter House at Byland, but used to walk forth as far as Kirkby by night, and one night he struck out one eye of his former mistress. And it is said that the abbot and monks had his body dug up from the grave, together with the coffin, and forced Roger Wayneman to cart it as far as Gormire, and how when they were throwing this coffin in the water the oxen almost sank in too in their terror. May I not be in any peril myself for writing such things, for I have written just what I heard from my seniors! And may God Omnipotent have mercy on him, if indeed he might be among the number of those to be saved!

It is significant that in this instance the writer is not describing a contemporary event, but one which occurred a good many years previously, perhaps as much as two generations, as it is not clear whether the old people who told him about it had witnessed the disinterment themselves, or were merely passing on information at second hand. It may be a belated memory of the physical destruction of corpses so common in William of Newburgh's time, though here by water, not fire—as in much lore about ghost-laying in later periods (Motif E437.2; cf. Brown 1979, 27–34; Simpson 1976, 93–6).

Walking Corpses

Apart from James Tankerlay, the Byland Abbey ghosts are laid by spiritual means. Nevertheless, most of them manifest themselves in physical forms, so it is still justifiable to call them walking corpses. The one in Story III "used to come out of his grave at night and disturb and terrify the townsfolk, and all the town dogs used to follow him about, barking loudly." A group of youths went to the graveyard to catch him, but only two were brave enough to stand their ground when he appeared. One pinned him against the churchyard stile, shouting to the other, "Quick! Go and get the priest to conjure him down, and what I've got I'll hold on to, with God's help, till the priest comes." The priest does come, and absolves the ghost's sins, after which it can rest. Similarly, in Story VI a man defends himself from a ghost by wrestling. Story XII speaks of a ghost being "captured," again implying physicality.

Story V, however, is different. It is the briefest of the tales, and says simply:

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> There is something else, quite amazing, which I write of. It is said that a certain woman caught a ghost and carried it on her back into a certain house, into the presence of some men, one of whom reported that he saw the woman's hands plunging deeply into the ghost's flesh, as if its flesh were rotten, and not solid but illusory [*fantastica*].

"This is most curious," says M. R. James in a footnote. "Why did the woman catch the ghost and bring it indoors?" I think the answer may be that she did it for a bet or a dare, and got more than she bargained for. This guess rests on a migratory legend common in Scandinavia (ML 4020, "The Unforgiven Skeleton"), telling how a servant-girl who prides herself on her courage accepts a challenge to go into a church at midnight and fetch a sack of unburied bones, or a skeleton, left lying around there. But the skeleton takes offence and leaps onto her back, forcing her to carry it to a priest, or to someone it had wronged, to obtain forgiveness. If this is indeed what the Byland monk had in mind, it fits in well with his concern that the dead should be loosed from their sins. And the reason it is brief to the point of obscurity may be that he jotted it down as an afterthought in a small blank space; it comes at the foot of fol. 142b, and the next page begins a new story. He noted only the one point which had so astonished him: the permeability of the ghost's flesh. Evidently he expected revenants to be solid and graspable, as in Stories III, VI, and probably XII.

Shape-Shifting Ghosts at Byland

There are other ways too in which these supernatural encounters diverge from the medieval norm. They occur out of doors, whereas in other religious literature the souls of the dead generally manifest themselves to persons in bed, and it is often left uncertain whether this is a dream or an apparition in the full sense of the word (Schmitt 1998). In several cases the encounter is initially highly ambiguous—not because there is ever any doubt in the narration that the entity which is scaring the percipient is objectively real, but because it first manifests itself in weird non-human forms. These ghosts can be multiple shape-shifters.

In Story I, a man carrying a sack of beans sees "something like a horse rearing up on its hind-legs with its forelegs in the air," which then turns into "a whirling heap of hay with a light in the middle of it." He cries out "God forbid you should harm me!," whereupon it takes human form and explains why it haunts the spot. The man arranges for a priest to absolve the ghost posthumously and say Masses for it, which sets it at rest. In Story II, a tailor called Snawball, [6] riding from Gilling to Ampleforth one night, encounters a crow with sparks of fire flashing from its sides, which flaps round his head and then knocks him off his horse; he draws his sword, "and it seemed to him he was attacking a peat-stack in a marsh;" then it reappears as a dog with a chain round its neck. At this stage Snawball successfully conjures the apparition by the Trinity and Christ's wounds to explain what it wants; it speaks from its guts rather than its tongue, and he can see through its mouth that all its innards are on fire. Whether it is still in dog-form or has turned human is not said. He promises to obtain a written absolution and lay it in the ghost's grave, and to arrange for numerous Masses for its repose. He then tries to send it away to "Hoggebek"; it shrieks "No, no, no!," but consents to go to "Bilandbank." [7] Some days later, having

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persuaded certain priests and friars in York to do what was required, Snawball goes to an agreed spot to summon the ghost and report progress; he protects himself with a circle and holy objects, as described earlier. This is just as well, since the ghost now appears as a goat which goes three times round the circle, bleating; he conjures it and it falls down flat, only to leap up again as a huge and hideous man, "as thin as one of the Dead Kings in the painting," [8] before announcing that it will be allowed to enter Heaven next Monday. Not only is this ghost himself a shape-changer, he describes others which appear "like a thorn bush or a fire," like a huntsman, and "like a bull-calf [*boviculus*] without mouth, eyes, or ears."

There is yet another shape-changing spirit in Story VIII, which is first heard yelling in the distance, then heard closer at a crossroads, then seen in the form of a pale horse, and finally turns into a spinning object [*recessit ad instar cuiusdam canvas reuoluentis quatuor angulis et volutabat*]. This sentence has perplexed translators. One renders it as "assumed the likeness of a piece of canvas with four corners, and rolled away" (Wilson 1976, 15); another has "took the form of a revolving wine-vat with four angles" (Chamberlaine 1979, 44); a third, "it drew back into its winding-sheet, drew the four corners together, and rolled itself up in it" (Mullin 1979, 115); a fourth, "changed into the likeness of a cloth with four corners, and rolled away" (Roden and Roden 2001, 464).

Shape-Shifting Spirits in Later Folklore

The nature of ghostly apparitions continued to be debated by learned writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, both in Britain and on the Continent; some, including Augustin Calmet (1746), accepted the possibility of reanimated corpses. It is harder to find traces of popular beliefs during these centuries, but when English folklore began to be systematically recorded in the nineteenth century an intriguing picture emerges. This folklore includes a good many local legends about exorcism, but in Protestant, not Catholic, terms; the aim of the procedure is not to speed the ghosts on their way to Heaven by absolutions and requiems, but to bully them into submission by psalms, and then banish them into deep water or some distant and desolate spot for as long as possible. In several tales, the revenants appear in animal form, either of their own volition or at the orders of the exorcist. One cluster of such stories occurs in the counties bordering on Wales. At Kington in Herefordshire the ghost of Black Vaughan would appear sometimes as a fly and more often as a bull, until twelve parsons "read him down" into a silver snuff-box which they laid in a pool for a thousand years (Leather 1912, 29–30); at Bagbury in Shropshire the ghost of a wicked squire "came again" as a roaring bull with flaming eyes and horns, sometimes said to be skinless, and was eventually laid in a snuff-box in the Red Sea (or in a boot under the door-stone of Hyssington church) (Burne 1883, 107–11 and 642). The famous Cornish ghost of Tregeagle at one point spontaneously appears as a black bull, but more commonly in Devon and Cornwall it is the exorcist who forcibly turns the revenant into an animal, which is then driven into deep water (Brown 1979, 28–31).

There are even closer parallels to the fantastic features of the Byland Abbey stories in a different type of folk tradition, well documented in Victorian

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collections. This concerns grotesque spectres in the form of animals or objects, which were not viewed as ghosts of dead humans, but as supernatural beings in their own right, lurking in lanes to scare night travellers. Dogs, horses, and calves were common, and often had fiery eyes. In Cheshire, there was a pig with its back studded with lighted candles (Haworth and Comber 1952, 83), and also a headless duck (Haworth and Comber 1961, 87); a road in Crowborough (Sussex) was haunted by a bag of soot, which chased a boastful blacksmith down the road (Firmin 1890, 141–2).

Most significant in relation to the Byland tales are apparitions which did not limit themselves to one shape, but took on a variety of curious forms. Collectors classified them as "sprites" or "hobgoblins," and linked them to the more alarming types of mischievous fairy; Katharine Briggs agreed, and dubbed them all "bogey-beasts." Around Leeds, there was one creature called Padfoot which could look like a white dog, or like a bale of wool rolling along the road, or be invisible; and another called the Barguest which generally appeared as a shaggy black dog with fiery eyes (Henderson 1879, 273–5). Then there was the Yorkshire Gytrash, with a remarkable repertoire of shapes at its command. Charlotte Brontë mentions it in *Jane Eyre* (1847, chap. 12) as "a spirit … which, in the form of horse, mule or large dog, haunted solitary ways"; Branwell Brontë, in an unpublished fragment entitled *Percy* (1837, Brontë Parsonage Museum), says it is "a spectre not at all similar to the ghosts of those who were once alive, nor to fairies, nor to demons," appearing mostly as "a black dog dragging a chain, a dusky calf, nay, even a rolling stone," and as "an old, hideous, and dwarfish man, as often without a head as with one, moving at dark along the naked fields." For good measure, the Gytrash could also appear as a large cow; to see it was an omen of death (Wright 1913, 194). Equally protean was a creature at the village of Hedley in Northumberland. It could look like a bundle of straw, a horse, a cow, or a human (Henderson 1879, 270–1); in one humorous story it changes from one form to another: an iron pot full of gold coins, a lump of silver, a lump of iron, a stone, and finally its own natural shape, that of a frisky horse (Jacobs 1894, 50–3).

Interpreting the Encounter

What can account for the fact that the Byland Abbey ghosts are in some respects more like bogey-beasts than the ghosts in other medieval sources, or even the ghosts of later legends? The explanation may lie in a fusion of two systems of interpretation, both seeking to make sense of a disturbing experience. As is well known, memorates and legends arise when something perceived as "uncanny" (a dark shape, a curious light or sound, and so on) is described in terms drawn from the belief-system of the perceiver and his or her community. One could theorise that Yorkshire people of the early Middle Ages had inherited local traditions which predisposed them to expect weird supernatural manifestations in the dusk—a whirling heap of hay with a light in it, an aggressive fiery crow, a faceless bull-calf, a dog with a chain round its neck—but which did not supply a religious meaning for them. Like nineteenth-century country people speaking of a Barguest or a Gytrash, they might not have defined exactly what such creatures were, or ascribed a purpose to them.

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However, in the course of the later Middle Ages the Church's increasing emphasis on the doctrine of Purgatory permeated society, stressing that souls of sinners needed help from the living through prayers, alms-giving, and Masses. The informants who described their supernatural encounters to the Byland monks around 1400 had thoroughly absorbed these teachings; they now had a moral and spiritual framework to supply significance to what they had experienced, and to show them what action they ought to take. It is not a question of clerics imposing a religious interpretation on a puzzled layman's experience; the man who saw the whirling heap of hay, Snawball the tailor, and all the other percipients, rapidly and spontaneously identified the apparitions as souls in torment. They then went to priests and monks, but not in search of explanations or advice—simply to request the professional services which they knew were needed, and which only the clergy could give. But at the Reformation, this interpretation was forbidden, and a bogey henceforth could only be a bogey, never a ghost.

A Multiplicity of Medieval Views

In considering these two groups of tales, we have seen that each contains a combination of theological and folkloric elements, but that the theology of Byland Abbey is not that of William of Newburgh, and neither is the folklore. Furthermore, it is not possible to make a neat division, assigning theological attitudes to the clergy and/or an educated élite, and folkloric ideas to an underclass. Encountering the supernatural is never a simple matter, and we must be grateful that chance has allowed us to overhear these few fragments of what must have been an ongoing medieval debate in which neither clerics nor laity spoke with a single voice.

Notes

[1] Elements of this paper were presented at the Folklore Society's Conference on the Supernatural in March 2000, and at the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research Conference in July 2000. A short discussion of the Byland Abbey material appeared in *Ghosts and Scholars* 27 (1998):40–4, and has been reprinted in Roden and Roden (2001, 631–7).

[2] Royal MS. 15. A. xx in the British Library, dating from the late-twelfth or early-thirteenth century. Reviewing Schmitt's book in *Ghosts and Scholars* 29 (1999):54, Donald Tumasonis expressed anxiety that the interpolated passages might be a forgery, but Dr M. P. Brown of the Department of MSS at the British Library informs me (letter of 3 March 2000) that "there is no paleographical reason to question their authenticity," and confirms that the dates given by M. R. James both for the MS itself and for the additions to it are correct. The tales have been translated by M. Benzinski (1978), Pamela Chamberlaine (1979), and Christopher Roden and Barbara Roden (2001). Some passages are also translated in R. M. Wilson (1976, 10–33). However, the renderings in the present paper are my own.

[3] Carl Watkins, "Folklore and 'Popular Religion' in Medieval England: Sources and Problems." Paper read at a conference on "Folklore and the Historian" at the Warburg Institute, London, 6 May 2000. For this issue in relation to beliefs about death, see Caciola (1996).

[4] Literally, "blood-sucker," the normal Latin term for a leech. Montague Summers yields to the temptation to render this as "vampire," and further distorts the sentence by translating it as

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"they realised this vampire had battened on the blood of many poor folk," turning a mere comparison into a statement of fact (Summers 1929 [1996], 88).

[5] Collins calls this a theological impossibility, revealing crass ignorance, since "it has never been permitted to shrive a man already dead, as he is already in God's hands" (Collins 1999, 25). This is an over-simplification. One influential early text seems to blur the distinction between forgiveness of sin and remission of punishment: St Gregory the Great, describing how a penitent ghost was laid by prayer, commented that "purification from sin after death was possible" for him because he sinned through ignorance, while Caesarius of Heisterbach wrote that "so great a benefit is confession that even the spirits of the dead make use of it" (both cited in Finucane 1982, 45 and 61). Finucane regards belief in postmortem absolution as fairly normal before the Reformation, especially up to the end of the thirteenth century (Finucane 1982, 64–5 and 85). In French medieval belief, there was little distinction between the absolution granted to the living and the *absout*, the prayer for forgiveness uttered over a corpse at its funeral (Ariès 1983, 140–1).

[6] There is a blank in the manuscript for a Christian name to be inserted, which was never done. Collins thinks it likely that this tailor was the forebear of the Snowballs of Great Ayton, about twenty miles north of Byland, a family which had become wealthy by the fifteenth century, and still live in the area; the present Rector of Great Ayton is a Mr Snowball. If so, one aim of the tale would be to show how the tailor got his money by following the ghost's advice that if he moved from Ampleforth to another district he would become rich—a morally dubious source (Collins 1999, 26).

[7] Collins identifies these places as Hodgebeck, which belonged to Byland Abbey, and Byland Brink Hill, which, despite its name, belonged to the Canons of Newburgh; there is a sarcastic implication that the sinful ghost dreaded being in the domain of Byland, but would feel at home on Newburgh land.

[8] A popular motif in fourteenth-century art was the encounter between three young noblemen and three semi-decayed corpses who warn them: "As you are, so once were we; as we are, so will you be." The corpses sometimes wear crowns.

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